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## Counter-Reformation: the Search for a Unified John Donne

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**Counter-Reformation:**  
the Search for a Unified John Donne

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

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## Abstract

The agenda of this paper is a re-examination of the de-facto formation of a literary character. John Donne is one of history's most celebrated metaphysical poets. A quasi-contemporary of William Shakespeare, his biography has been similarly (if obviously to a lesser degree) plumbed. The turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century offers, in terms of hard facts, only tantalizing details left by fortuitous accident, and it has been the realm of biographers and early modern scholars to piece together the fragments. In the case of John Donne, this has manifested as a genealogy of literary biography that frequently melds scant fact, poetic manuscripts, and agreed upon assumptions to give us an image of a man who is less person than personification of the tumultuous and revolutionary times in which he lived.

The image formed of John Donne is a chronologically distinct collection of personalities: the scholar, the rogue, the soldier and the theologian, culminating in a dichotomy between the youthful Jack Donne, and the revered Dr. Donne. This paper will seek to trouble that construction in two ways. In the first part, the paper will examine three major literary biographies which helped to construct this image—*John Donne: A Life*, by R.C. Bald, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* by John Carey, and *Donne: The Reformed Soul*, by John Stubbs—and deconstruct their conclusions. In the second part of the paper, I will address the poetic canon of John Donne. In the collusion of both I will attempt to propose a unified John Donne, replete with biographical and literary continuity.

## Acknowledgements

This project has been underway for two years, since the fall of 2010, when I began the process of sifting through vast amounts of material, cloistered within the comforting confines of a reading room at the British Library at St. Pancras, London. My wonderful advisor, Professor Dymphna Callaghan has been metaphorically by my side the whole way, starting work on this project even before I did, compiling a reading list that was in and of itself several pages long ‘just to get me started’. She has been a crucial supporter, a vital resource, and a mentor who has inspired me since my very first day on campus four years ago. I know that I would have quit before I even started but for her.

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“For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love.”

— **John Donne**, *The Canonization*

## Introduction

In 1595, when John Donne was about twenty three years old, he sat for a portrait. Long and dimly lit, the painting is dark in both color and theme. The young man portrayed is good looking, and fashionably dressed. His posture is easy and confident as he leans forward towards the viewer, and his broad hat is provocatively set at an extreme angle that can only be described as rakish. Although dark, his clothes are heavily embroidered — this is clearly a young man who takes great care with his appearance. The Donne portrayed here is not effusing the joy and energy of youth, however. This Donne has a long thin face, and his wistful expression is coupled with shadowed eyes and an undone collar, whose strings hang down in disarray, a contrast to the attention to detail within the embellishment of the outfit. His fingers, resting lightly against the black of his coat are starkly white and almost painfully thin. The long fingers are delicate and aristocratic. These are the sensitive hands of a poet. The Latin inscription is plaintive, “O Lady, lighten our darkness”<sup>i</sup>.

This is Jack Donne, the youthful poet and lover, the amorous, passionate scholar. He is known as a clandestine catholic, the scion of a legacy tracing back to the martyrdom of Sir Thomas Moore. He is a young dilettante, with a sizeable inheritance. He is an ambitious political neophyte, with the ambition to

unscrupulously rise to the highest arenas at court. He is the would-be adventurer, eager for the glory and wealth associated with conquest. But perhaps most famously, he is a reckless suitor, a ‘great visitor of ladies’ (R. Baker), a Don Juan of ill repute and great reputation.

This vision of John Donne is in stark contrast to another famous image: Martin Droeshout’s famous engraving that served as the frontispiece to a 1633 publication of Donne’s final sermon, “Death’s Duell.”<sup>ii</sup> The engraving carries an inscription below the portrait, a quote commonly attributed to Donne, “Corporis hæc Animæ sit Syndon Syndon Jesu / Amen” (or “May this shroud of the body be the shroud of the soul: the shroud of Jesus)<sup>iii</sup>.”

The engraving is in fact a rendering of a work drawing made for Nicholas Stone’s marble monument to Donne that stands today in St. Paul’s Cathedral<sup>iv</sup>. The portrait depicts an aged and ailing Donne, hollow cheeked and serious. The eyes are closed, in death or sleep, or perhaps even piety. The strong gaze so manifest in the 1595 portrait, the intense gaze that connects the viewer to Donne is totally absent. This face suggests a mind not directed out into the world but rather internally. Strikingly, the figure is clad in a funeral shroud, embodying death and otherworldliness as much as it is possible to do so.

This Donne is Dr. Donne, the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral. He is a church elder, a devout Anglican. He is the head of a family and a favored preacher of King James. He is a theologian, obsessed with death and the *métier* of the soul.

The extreme disparity between the portraits typifies the perceived disparities between Jack Donne and Doctor Donne, prompting posterity to ask



“how could the reckless young lover possibly become the gaunt and contemplative man of the church”? When faced with the comparison of two such evidently different characters, the reconciliation of the two is often achieved through a narrative of personal revolution. Because the characters are so very different, they are often treated as not so much the extreme evolution of one man as two different people, sometimes many more than two. This is not wholly a trope of scholars, or even one that dates exclusively from this century. John Donne himself was responsible for the dissemination of these images, a sort of early modern public relations campaign. This image has grown since then, and it has become a given in Donne’s biographies.

Donne’s most influential modern biographers, R.C. Bald, John Carey, and John Stubbs, all capitulate to the idea of a Donne who is a moving target, whose personality is never quite stable enough to pin down. Bald’s *John Donne: A Life*, in the words of the Encyclopedia Britannica, “remains the definitive biography”. Bald’s work (published posthumously in 1970) is largely a response to the work of Izaak Walton. It is therefore in large part an effort to, “[bring] together every scrap of relevant information,” to create an “adequate biography,” an urge (fueled by the revival of Donne’s popularity and as sudden thirst for biographical details) that prompts a good deal of speculation as to the motives of John Donne (Bald 1). John Carey, writing his *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* in 1981, seeks instead to underline the “transformative” nature of John Donne the poet, and in the process paints John Donne’s biography with the same trope of ‘transformation’ on the “structure of [Donne’s] imagination (Carey 9). The most recent, *John Donne:*

*The Reformed Soul*, John Stubbs' thoroughly enjoyable biography, seeks to situation John Donne in the context of the Reformation, and, in some ways, make the poet's life emblematic of that contextual turmoil. Thus John Donne is continually subjected to a kind of perennial biographical schizophrenia, becoming in his biographies something like an unstable collection of multiple personalities.

Another approach is possible however, and is the lens that I will attempt to take up within this paper. Instead of asking how Donne changed from Jack Donne the Rogue to Dr. Donne the Preacher, I will instead ask if it is not possible that the change did not take place. I'm not attempting to re-write history or subvert historical facts, but I will seek to show that even given the same basic life facts, an interpretation of reformation or revolution is not inevitable. John Donne was born in 1572 into a notoriously Catholic family and was later in life appointed Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (Stubbs 8-14). These are the facts, upon which the foundation for a deep-seated religious reformation lies. But does a Catholic background necessarily mean that a young boy away at school will be equally devout in the face of overwhelming opposition? At a time when the Church was a political arm, does a post as an Anglican minister make one particularly religious? I think not, especially when many biographical indicators show that Donne had a much more problematic struggle with religion. Similarly, Donne's poetry and a classmate's comments paint him as a young rogue, who is later reformed to a devoted husband upon meeting Anne, the love of his life. There is reason to believe, however, that Donne was not so much a rogue in the first place, that his poetry was fictional, a literary exercise, and a specious persona that leaked out

slowly to the public, for whom Jack Donne was synonymous with the poetry that had begun quietly circulating within the University community. All of Donne's life revolutions—from scholar, to soldier, to Member of Parliament, to starving poet to exalted dean—can be thus probed, and motivations questioned. It is the intention of this paper to strip away the propaganda and poetry, to ask if Donne's malleable biography is necessarily accurate.

The issue is of particular import because in the analysis of John Donne's poetry, this question is the fulcrum for most analysis. Much of Donne's work is seen as being in some way autobiographical, largely due to the frank and confessional tone that he helped to pioneer. His poetic voice is authentic, seemingly genuine, and in many ways self-reflexive. His poetry has a solid first person presence, and in a publishing world free from the overwhelming influence of the novel, his work, particularly in the early years, presents a unified and an exceptionally identifiable protagonist. In poems such as *The Perfume* he recounts exploits as familiarly as an old friend in confidence, prompting critics to feel an authenticity in the tale. As the speaker describes sneaking stealthily through the halls of his lover's house, attempting to hush the noise of his 'silkes' as he walked, the reader is as involved as a compatriot, and is as disappointed as a good friend would be upon hearing that the young man was found out. In poems such as *The Apparition*, the raw emotion expressed is so authentic and common to the human experience, that it is tempting for one to believe that it was John Donne himself who was seeing the ghost of an old lover as he wrote. That poems like

*The Calm*<sup>v</sup> recognizably correspond to distinct life events make it all the more plausible that his other work corresponds directly to more private life events.

It is therefore natural to feel that this poetic protagonist is in some tangible way actually Donne himself, that the stories and thoughts he portrays are at least based on his own experience. This is significant as his writing did at least superficially undergo several shifts in subject matter throughout his life. The poetry of young Jack Donne about women, the poetry of the Dr. Donne the man of the church was about God; the poetry of John Donne the husband about love for a wife, and children; the poetry of the widower about love beyond death. That Donne's subject matter sometimes drew inspiration from his surroundings is therefore beyond question.

This paper will seek to use biography to answer the question: is Donne's work substantively autobiographical? In order to effectively address the question, the work will focus on a specific biographical issue—namely, the generally accepted trope of his 'Reformation'. That a public image of John Donne projected a man whose interests and situation over the course of his life varied more than that of most men is without question. Like most people, poets are not inherently different people simply because of a change in their interests. Moreover, a change in profession, especially when one is very young or when dire economic circumstances necessitate it in order to feed a large family, mean very little about one's internal life. This paper will examine the three major Donne biographies, (*John Donne: A Life*, by R.C. Bald, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* by John Carey, and *Donne: The Reformed Soul*, by John Stubbs), and demonstrate the

ways in which they brook the major changes in John Donne's life, in order to ultimately paint a more fluid picture, in which it is very possible that the man remained the same, while only external circumstances changed around him.

In the second part of the paper, this conclusion will be supplemented by poetic analysis, offering interpretations that argue for a constant poet. The paper will provide arguments that although Donne's subject matter undeniably changed over time, that subject matter is relatively superficial and ultimately bears little import to the true impact of the work. Arguments will be provided that subject within Donne's poetry is not much more significant than nouns that correspond appropriately with Donne's external condition. Rather what will be important are the themes, metaphors, and tropes used by Donne *throughout* his poetic career. What is constant in Donne's poetry is more fundamental than apparent subject.

Ultimately, this paper will examine and challenge the 'reformation' discourse in order to seek instead of Jack Donne and Dr. Donne, a unified John Donne, both as a man and poet.

## ***Part One***

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*Biography*

## Chapter I. From Scholar to Soldier

Richard Topcliffe is a man whom history has come to revile. He began his career as a magistrate and the Member of Parliament for Beverly and the Old Sarum. Although for many years, he was officially a servant of William Cecil, the Queen's secretary, and the Privy Council, his true authority came from the Queen herself. This authority was in fact much wider than most of the Secretary's servants, for in addition to his other duties, he was the premier persecutor of recusant Catholics in Elizabethan England, as well as her most enthusiastic torture aficionado. Despite the fact that his most elaborate torture chamber was located conveniently within his own home, his true role was a very public one embedded in the national consciousness. In his most active period, knowledge and fear of his role infiltrated even popular colloquiums; 'a topcliffian custom' was putting someone on the rack, while 'topcliffzare' was a verb: to hunt a recusant Catholic (Richardson).

In 1593, Topcliffe abruptly entered Donne's life in a very personal way. The Inns of Court, London's legal universities, were an ideal place for secret Catholics, due to laws limiting unregulated searches within the Inns. Henry Donne, John's brother, was a student at the Inns during this period, and his room was raided by Topcliffe's agents. There, agents discovered a hiding Catholic

priest, one William Harrington. Both men were promptly arrested, tortured, and imprisoned at Southwark.

The period must have been an exceptionally upsetting one for the John Donne who is the focus of this paper. The Donne brothers had, by this time, been together, without their other family, since they began their higher education as young boys. Beginning in 1584, the Donne brothers were students at Hart Hall, Oxford. They started school at a young age- John was about twelve, with his brother Henry around eleven. This young age was unusual, as most of the other students enrolled at Oxford at the time were in their late teens. However, their comparative youth was not by any means anomalous, and it was common for exceptionally bright boys from good families to be sent up early. The brothers' precipitous entrance at Hart Hall could therefore very reasonably be taken as evidence that the young brothers were intellectually gifted, and the reason for their introduction to higher education was the alacrity with which they outstripped the level of their private tutors.

There is another more scandalous motive attributed to the Donnes' precocious education, and it stems from their Catholic roots. In the late 16th century at Oxford, older pupils were required to swear an oath forswearing the Papacy and affirming their allegiance to the Anglican Church. Many scholars believe that the Catholic Donne brothers went to Oxford at such a young age in order to get a thorough education early, so that they might leave before being asked to swear the oath. Similarly Catholic motives are attributed to the boys' enrollment at Hart Hall in particular, discussed below.



Despite Donne's apparent intellectual aptitude, he left Oxford before taking a degree. Donne transferred to Cambridge, where he studied without matriculating. This lack of official matriculation allowed, in many ways, for Donne to begin his interest in poetry. As a nonmatriculated student, Donne was free of the restraints of an official curriculum. At Cambridge therefore, Donne was allowed to follow his interests in his studies, which tended to be wide ranging. Donne's first biographer, Walton, points out that Donne was 'often changing his studies.' During these wide ranging studies, Donne began to write poetry and found, by all accounts, a creative atmosphere at Cambridge, where he stayed until sometime before 1591.

We know that Donne had left Cambridge by that time as it is that year that he appears on the registers at Thavies Inn in London, studying Law. Then nineteen, Donne sat for that first famous portrait in this year<sup>vi</sup>. Donne's legal education during these years was supplemented by private tutors in Mathematics and Liberal Arts, and in 1592, when he moved to the more residential Lincoln's Inn, his most formal poetic education began. As at Oxford, Donne became involved within a small group of bright young men, to whom he addressed his first verse letters and who more than likely provided the first critical audience for his poetry. Donne's work was passed around, and copies made within his set, which can only have served to develop Donne's burgeoning skill. Donne worked hard however, at this point, to restrict the circulations of his manuscripts (Bald 78). Despite his other interests, his biographers all emphasize that Donne was a

diligent and gifted legal student, to whom the practices of the Inns of Court, including ‘moots’ and ‘case-puttings’, “all came rather easily” (Stubbs 37).

Although complete records do not exist for every period, it is accepted that Henry was likely to have followed the course of his brother at almost every point of their formal educations. John Donne is likely, therefore, to have been nearby at the time of his brother’s arrest with Harrington at the Inns of Court. After a few months imprisonment, Harrington was swiftly tried and condemned for refusing to renounce his papacy. Henry did not survive long enough to face trial. He was moved from Southwark to Newgate, where plague was rampant; once there Henry quickly succumbed. (Stubbs 44).

Some biographers see this trauma as the impetus for a fundamental change in Donne’s outlook. For John Stubbs, in *The Reformed Soul*, Henry’s death created in Donne a “hollow space” which made him dissatisfied with the painful memories of his life in London and at the Inns of Court, creating a wish to leave that life completely behind (45). Although Stubbs acknowledges a lack of evidence for this interpretation of Donne’s feelings, Donne did, certainly, leave London.

In 1596, he began the next phase in his life, when he volunteered to sail with a naval expedition against the Spanish Armada. He went from the study of law to intense military training, leaving the Inns of Court for a naval garrison. There, the formerly scholarly Donne was subjected to two months of disciplined exercise in preparation for the Queen’s orders. This was not a dilatory gentleman’s camp by any means; volunteers were subject to the rigid standards of

army life- indeed, while preparing for the expedition two men at the camp were hung for failing to uphold those standards. In May of that year, shortly after the death of Sir Francis Drake, orders came from the Queen for Donne's armada to sail out under the command of the Earl of Essex.

The armada did not make it far, however. Bad weather and perverse winds pushed the ships back into port almost as soon as they had left. After spending the night in port, the expedition shipped out again, successfully this time, but the bumbling stop and go of the first night often characterized Donne's time at sea. This is not to say that there were not episodes of outright success for the outfit. The expedition sailed to Cadiz, where a raid on the city was devastating to the town and its inhabitants. The raid officially ended when the Governor of Cadiz, the Duke of Medina-Sidonia, surrendered the town and was ransomed by the sympathetic Lord Admiral, but for the citizens of Cadiz the British visit was far from over. Soldiers sacked the town, and the inhabitants were forced to give up everything to the pillaging soldiers, not simply valuables, but often every possession, right down to stores of food and wine. A victory for the glory of England. The mission then moved down the Portuguese coast taking the town of Faro as well before heading back to London. It was the life of a soldier and a sailor, and Donne's time within the cloistered walls of the Inns of Court must have seemed to belong to another era.

After a year living the lifestyle of a young gentleman in London, Donne again volunteered for another expedition, this time to Ferrol and the Azores in mid 1597. This expedition was more difficult for the troops. Within the first week,

the fleet was hit by a storm that separated the fleet. Those ships that managed to return to port in Plymouth needed heavy repair, and the troops were landed until August. When they finally set sail again, they found themselves stranded by a near total lack of wind while in the Azores. While stalled in the Azores archipelago, comprised of nine tropical islands in the Atlantic, the troops suffered frustration in unbearable heat. When they could move again, the expedition still constituted a total failure, with no victories or corresponding spoils at all.

On the surface, the young soldier coming home from the Azores might have been a very different person from the young boy who had left Cambridge years before. He certainly had a plethora of new life experiences. This transition, from a young legal scholar to a worldly sailor, marks the first in the series of personal revolutions characterized by Donne scholars. To fully understand the revolutions portrayed, one must examine the various motives attributed to the career change.

John Stubbs, in *The Reformed Soul*, paints a picture of a young Donne who becomes infatuated with the cult of Essex, and resolves to leave behind forever the study of law to become, in the vein of Essex, a swashbuckling adventurer. For Stubbs, “it is not hard to imagine Donne as a young man looking around and feeling a certain lack in his urban, bookish pursuits” (Stubbs 51). In fact, Stubbs contends that Donne resolved at this point never to apply his legal education (“one might as well have been a leper”) (Stubbs 49). Stubbs contends that this void was fulfilled when Donne, “became entranced” by an expedition to South America lead in 1595 by Sir Walter Raleigh (Stubbs 51).

It was not, however, in Stubbs's estimation, simply the draw of the expedition for its own sake, or a disenchantment with boring legal employment. An added influence was the Earl of Essex, a favorite of Queen Elizabeth who was chosen to lead the 1596 expedition. The Earl was something of a celebrity, and was in the words of John Stubbs, "a legend, the hero of flash young men" (53). Donne himself is not excluded from this category of "flash young men". For Stubbs, "it is not difficult to see how Donne could have fallen into steps with Essex's admirers... Donne was somewhat starstruck" (Stubbs 53-54). Thus Donne is characterized to have been changed, by emulating hero worship, from an aspiring scholar to a passionate soldier with adventure in his heart.

For Bald, Donne's transformation from scholar to soldier was much more internal than for Stubbs. Although he briefly acknowledges that Donne's motives for joining the navy might be mixed, Bald ultimately comes down on the side of a Donne infused with a sense of adventure and patriotism. For Bald, Donne's "participation represented a real decision. He was overtly identifying himself with his country's cause" (Bald 81). Bald takes a few lines of Donne's poetry at the time as, "evidence of a deep and genuine feeling" (81).

Furthermore, the 'cult of Essex' is also a factor attributed to Donne's newfound profession as described in Bald's biography. As was explained above, the Earl of Essex was more than usually appealing to young men of fashion, and his charisma certainly made the 'voluntaries' something of a cause célèbre. Like Stubbs, Bald counts Donne among the young men who, "were eager to participate in the adventure, the more because one of the leaders was Essex, whose warm and

impetuous nature captured their imagination” (80). Donne’s imagination may have been made a more fecund place, Bald claims, as Donne had already become disillusioned with his legal studies, leaving behind the youthful scholar he had previously been. In the chronology of *John Donne: A Life*, this fundamental change occurs during the period immediately after Donne left Lincoln’s Inn, when he was living the life of a young gentleman in London, drawing on his inheritance for income. Bald writes that, “in retrospect the years at Lincoln’s Inn had been largely wasted. A certain unworldliness, tinged perhaps with youthful snobbery, characterized his attitude during these years” (78). Bald thus presents to us a Donne who undergoes an abrupt change, from a scholar with an intense interest in the law, to an adventurer, wholly uninterested in the law in any form, who had no thought of economic planning.

Carey’s interpretation of the transition offers nothing not also included by Bald and Stubbs. In a passing description of the period, which is relatively undiscussed in *Life, Mind, & Art*, Carey notes the two common motives, worship of Essex and patriotism. However for Carey, the patriotism was not genuine, (or at least not necessarily genuine). He writes that Donne’s motive was, “to get himself known as a loyal Englishman, and so remove any suspicions relating to his Catholic upbringing, which might hinder his public career” calling Donne’s decision to join the voluntaries a “calculation” (65). Here, Carey argument supports the contention of this paper—unlike for Bald and Stubbs, for him, this decision does not seem to represent a different Donne.

So does the switch from student to soldier really necessitate the reinvention of John Donne? Does his desire to leave London for the sea require a personal tragedy and idolatrous obsession? The narrative of a young man denied childhood by early subjugation to academic rigor breaking free the confines of a scholarly existence is certainly compelling—how romantic, that a young legal scholar with the heart of a poet might throw off the shackles of quotidian existence with his soul fired up by patriotism and the hero-worship of England’s most dashing adventurers. But is this interpretation the sole possible explanation for the career shift?

The evidence offered by Stubbs and Bald for a new adventurous, patriotically motivated John Donne is based on two assumptions. This first is the sense that the change in lifestyle is so extreme between the world of a student and that of a soldier, those who would choose those lives must be very different people. While the lifestyle was certainly different, the overlap between the voluntaries and former university students was substantial. A stint in the voluntaries was a fashionable choice for educated young gentlemen from good families, (a fact that is not insignificant when considering a unified Donne). The second is a passage within his poem, “The Storme,” in which Donne writes, “England to whom we owe, what we be, and have” (Bald 81). For Bald and Stubbs, this is evidence of a Donne who is now wholly a part of the adventurous cause for England. However Carey, who seems to acknowledge that this new profession does not necessarily mean a new Donne (or at least does not argue that it does), also cites the “England to whom we owe” passage, but believes it to be

more akin to propaganda than to any deeply felt patriotism. Why Carey is willing to own that this line of verse may not reflect Donne's true feeling, (when at other times Donne's verse is the sole basis for biographical conclusion,) is never explained, but this passage, is ambiguous enough to be interpreted either way.

A more sober assessment reveals a more ordinary possibility. After having completed as much legal education as he was likely ever to complete, Donne was faced with the same stark reality facing many of today's new university graduates: limited income and a high level job market dominated by connections and networking. Much is made of Donne's gentlemanly status. It is true his good family background and access to university education put him in a much more privileged sphere from his earliest years than most English people of the time could dream of occupying. His gentle background is usually emphasized in comparisons with his most famous contemporary, William Shakespeare, whose upbringings were decidedly more humble. Unlike Shakespeare, his inclusion in the exclusive Oxbridge community meant that for him doors were open and respectability was a given.

The inheritance Donne received upon his father's death of about £500, was a generous sum for the time, coupled with an additional share after his brother's death. Still, it was not enough to make a young man independently wealthy, or to support the lifestyle of a gentleman for more than a few years.

The young Donne, a year out of school, had no intention of practicing law in the traditional sense, arguing cases before the court. Therefore, it is possible to take the adoption of a soldier's garb as a natural continuation of the career begun



by Donne at Lincoln's Inn, rather than any abrupt life change. A stint as a volunteer sailor would have had many practical benefits for Donne.

Donne was unquestionably living beyond his means. His inheritance was a fixed income; at this time Donne, dressing fashionably and behaving fashionably as well, was living the life of a young gentleman, while doing nothing to bring money in. In 1595 Donne went so far as to obtain a personal attendant, the young Thomas Danby, for whom Donne was contracted to contribute to his keeping and offer a small allowance (Stubbs 49). Short of funds after living this leisurely existence for a few years, the sailor's berth offered both a temporary job and the prospect of wealth. Even Stubbs notes, glossing over an important aspect, that Donne's "fortunes needed a boost that a share of the prospects might bring" (58). The destinations of these expeditions were also suggestive. Guiana in particular had a reputation for containing foreign riches. The prospect of raids on Spanish ports must have suggested the opportunity of amassing wealth. As a volunteer the likelihood of a large share of booty would have been admittedly small, but the lure of even the modest income supplementation offered by the expeditions would have appealed to the cash-strapped Donne, especially when coupled to the most attractive prospect in these makeshift navies— networking.

For Donne to use his education professionally, his best prospects would lie in attracting the notice, and favor, of someone influential. This is not using his education in a necessarily literal sense; he could become a barrister with relative ease, but that would be an affront to his gentle background and sense of pride. The education he would use would be a more 'courtly' one, the polish and

learning associated with being a gentleman, a prerequisite for anyone hoping to find employment at the highest levels of society.

Stubbs, Carey, and Bald all dwell upon the effusive patriotism that characterized these expeditions, and love of King and country did in all likelihood influence Donne's decision to go to sea. However this permeating air of patriotic duty also had a more practical side effect; joining the expeditions against the Spanish invaders became a fashionable option for young men of good family and background who found themselves at a bit of loose ends. Service breeds compatriots, and it would have been hard for Donne to fail to notice that joining the expeditions could not help but allow him to form connections with men (and families) that might help him in following a diplomatic or political career.

It is surprising, in fact, that these motivations for military service,(namely money and networking) aren't given more credence in the major biographies, as that is in fact the actual result of Donne's military service.

That Donne may have been working towards a career in political or diplomatic service is supported by the fact that after leaving the armada, that's exactly what he did, landing a job as the legal secretary to the Lord Keeper (later the Lord Chancellor) to Queen Elizabeth. This Lord Keeper was Sir Thomas Egerton, of York house. Egerton, himself a former lawyer, did not hire Donne on the basis of legal merit or patriotic reputation, but rather on the recommendation of his son, Sir Thomas the younger. This young Sir Thomas became a friend of John Donne while serving under Essex as part of the expedition against the Spanish armada. A secretary to such an important figure was not concerned with

stenography and scheduling, but in fact occupied a position of high honor and trust. Like being the chief of staff to an important senator, Donne would have been deeply involved in every aspect of the Lord Keeper's life, and a trusted recommendation for such a position would have been virtually the only way in the door. Far from being a departure, Donne's time as a privateer was in fact the basis for his political career. Gaining entrance into the household of the Lord Keeper also gave Donne the opportunity for another major personal "reformation" but that is a matter for another chapter.

## Chapter II. From Secretary to Politician

It was in 1601 that John Donne took a seat in Her Majesty's parliament and in John Stubbs' estimation became the person referred to as "The Member". Having been, at this point, the Secretary to the Lord Keeper for some time, Donne was selected as worthy of representing the interests of his employer. Donne was the Member for Brackley, Northants. The borough of Brackley had traditionally been in the possession of the Earls of Derby. When the Derby estates were partitioned, Berkley was given to Frances, one of the daughters of the estate. Her marriage to John Egerton meant that the property, and the corresponding seat in parliament, passed into the control of Donne's employer, the Lord Keeper Thomas Egerton. (Bald 114)

The Lord Keeper therefore had the prerogative to select a representative for the seat. John Egerton, through whom the property was obtained, would of course be the natural choice, but he was already returned to parliament as a member for Shropshire, and was thus unavailable for the Brackley seat. Egerton's choice then fell upon the young John Donne. Donne had distinguished himself as Egerton's secretary, inspiring great trust and confidence in his employer. Donne was therefore chosen, and sent up to London as a MP.

In *The Reformed Soul*, this period is, for John Stubbs, another one of Donne's personalities, "The Member", a distinct entity from "The Secretary" (Stubbs 86,144). These are the titles of the chapters into which Stubbs breaks up Donne's life; they are distinct chronologically, but also, as the chapter headings clearly imply, in terms of who John Donne was during these periods. For Stubbs, "Member" (and "Secretary" for that matter), are not incidental jobs but *identities*, defining Donne for those periods of his life when he held them.

In this case, Stubbs argues that the change was a conscious one for Donne. He describes a John Donne at this point who (as he is so often portrayed to be) was completely disillusioned with this former life, and attempting once again to begin a new one. During this time, Stubbs asserts, Donne "wanted to reforge himself, to scorch his spirit clean" (103). Although this assessment clearly indicates a virulent internal struggle and metamorphosis, the reasons for undertaking the change were intimately related to issues of public reputation. Stubbs' insistence on the need for an internal purging is clearly dependent on another Donne stereotype, the youthful "rogue" and the need for respectability among those seeking power in Elizabethan England.

In order to do this, Stubbs argues, Donne undertook several acts, both tangible and highly symbolic. The first step comes in the acquisition of property. According to the Recusancy Act of 1587, one of the penalties for proven recusancy was the surrender of two thirds of a person's property to the Crown. The lands that the government obtained from such transactions were often leased out to other parties, generating very lucrative and useful revenue for the Crown's

treasury. By keeping the land for rental rather than sale, the hope was that stubborn recusants would be encouraged to conform to Anglicanism, in order to have their property restored. On April 3, 1601, one John Heywood was put before the commission on recusancy at Lincoln. This John Heywood was related to John Donne, although it was not his famous grandfather but a rather more obscure distant cousin. This cousin had been an unabashedly flagrant Catholic throughout his life, and the confiscation of property was a lenient consequence. In 1584, he had been placed on a list of recusants, indicating poor church attendance, a relatively minor offense. However in 1599, a Jesuit brother, John Lily, was captured in his house. When Egerton came before the commission therefore, his guilt was readily proclaimed, and two thirds of his property was given into the possession of the crown (Bald 116-117).

The forfeited property included the Manor of Uphall in the County of Lincoln, and it is the lease to this property that Donne was given by the crown. It is possible that Donne's possession of the property may have been a means of keeping the property within the family, and therefore protecting its interests, but whatever the reason for it, John Donne was now a man of property, a prerequisite for advancement within Elizabethan society. This new propertied status carried one other marker that is very important for Stubbs' claim of transformation. John Donne, as one with a lease of land from the crown was now officially not merely John Donne, but John Donne, esquire (143). This new name, for Stubbs, was a signification of his crossover into his new life.

This new life enabled Donne's ascension to a seat in parliament, giving him political power not just as a servant of another, but in his own name. This authority was symbolic of a new Donne, who craved his own power, his own respectability. As even the chapter titles suggest, Donne's identity as a member of parliament was, for Stubbs, separate from Donne's identity as a secretary, both symbolically, and physically.

Unfortunately, the description of Donne in parliament offered by Carey, Bald, and even Stubbs himself undermines this construction of distinct Donnes. John Donne, it would seem, was not a particularly passionate or even active member of parliament. He held up his responsibilities with respectability, but was unwilling to distinguish himself by taking a position on anything. The parliament of 1601 was a "stormy" one, with ongoing debates over the question of monopolies (Bald 115). At the time, there was a practice, unpopular in many business circles for obvious reasons, of bestowing crown patents for certain commercial enterprises. These patents allowed businesses to have virtual monopolies, and the crown enjoyed heavy revenues from the taxation of these patents. As owners of property, many with extensive investments, many of the members of parliament had vested financial interests in the outcome of the issue, and the debate was therefore extensive. Passionate voices rose from both sides, and a longstanding tradition that every member had the right to express himself on a given issue kept the speeches from brevity. The controversy dragged on until the Queen herself intervened to declare her intention to uphold the patents.

Throughout the debate, Donne spoke not once, not even to interject. He sat in his seat, and remained completely silent. (Bald)

It is fair to say that a man who engages not at all in an exceptionally controversial political debate, even to the extent of expressing any opinion at all, is not interested in being a politician. We therefore must ask why Donne *was* a dutiful member of the 1601 parliament. It seems evident that it is not reasonable to conclude that he had not full embraced the identity of “The Member” but was rather still very much interested in advancement through public service and the court.

Furthermore, the acquisition of property, trumpeted by Stubbs as the harbinger of a new Donne, is not a significant departure from the ambitions furthered by his secretarial post. Property was not just useful for those wishing to serve as Members of Parliament, but also for those hoping for power in any social sense. In other words, obtaining a lease of land from the crown was just as useful for a person hoping to advance at court. Donne spent his whole life building his gentlemanly credentials, and obtaining land was no exception. This is, of course, assuming that Donne’s taking of the lease was for himself at all. As was mentioned previously, the land belonged to members of the family, so it is very possible that his land-lease was only a matter of family loyalty, having nothing at all to do with his professional ambitions. This possibility is made more likely by the fact that the terms of the lease were only temporary, so any gain accrued by Donne through the transaction would be conditional. Donne only had the land in



his possession for a few years. In 1605, John Heywood died and Donne's lease ended, as the property passed to Heywood's eldest son.

Donne's time in parliament was in fact only a continuation of his job as a secretary. Everything he did was to please the Lord Keeper and make advancement in that way. His silence within the debates was very likely an attempt to remain popular with the powerful people around him, who might later serve as valuable connections. More importantly, it was in the service of, and for the convenience of the Lord Keeper. Donne's stint as a Member of Parliament did not require any integral change in who Donne was- for him Member of Parliament was not, in all likelihood, a political post at all.

### Chapter III. From Rogue to Husband

Three weeks before Christmas in 1601, Ann More quietly left her father's house and travelled into London to the Savoy<sup>vii</sup>. Although she had, in all likelihood, the help and confidence of some members of the household, her outing was one of the utmost secrecy, at least from her venerable father. Sir George More would be, even under the best of circumstances, a formidable father-in-law. Born in 1553, by age twenty he had taken a degree at Oxford and entered the Inner Temple<sup>viii</sup>. Associated socially with both the Earl of Leicester and Sir Philip Sydney, he was knighted by Elizabeth in 1597. Three years later, he inherited the family estate at Loseley Park, near Guilford, and his wealth was thus elevated to match his lofty social rank. He was—as, crucially, was Ann—in all things that mattered to an Elizabethan father (fortune, rank, ancestry), John Donne's superior by an extremely wide margin (Bald 129).

This social disparity explains the secrecy with which Ann left her father's house, for that morning she intended to marry John Donne, the considerably older Secretary to the Lord Keeper, an employee of her family connections, and a man of whom her father could never conceivably approve. It is in fact probable that at the time the couple was married, More was actively engaged in trying to arrange a more advantageous marriage for his daughter (Bald 128). The service was a small

one<sup>ix</sup>, with an attorney friend of Donne's named Christopher Brooke standing in to give the bride away, an act which he most likely regretted later (Stubbs 154). Although no official record remains, it is likely that the ceremony took place in the chapel within the former Savoy hospital. Bald suggests the hospital chapel as a venue due to its proximity to Donne's lodgings (he was, at the time of his marriage, occupying rooms in the house of a Mr. Haines, which was located directly next to the Savoy). Significantly, the grounds of the former hospital were within what was known as a 'liberty', a location in which the ordinances of the City of London were relaxed. This was not a trivial factor—by marrying Ann More in secret, without parental consent, Donne was committing crimes that were certainly social and very probably legal in nature.

In marrying Ann, Donne was, at the very least, flouting conventions. Marriages at the time were extremely complex social and economic transactions, often pre-determined from childhood. The role of family in a marriage was usually a matter of course, and the right of a family to choose a husband for eligible daughters was not a matter of much dissent. As Stubbs notes, "when one says 'social' in this context, the term 'financial' should also be inferred" and by marriage to a social superior, Donne was depriving his father in law of a profitable transaction. More was wealthy and respected, and the likelihood is that with the portion that would have accompanied Ann's hand in marriage, More would have been able to purchase connections of elevated rank for his family<sup>x</sup>. Furthermore, the marriage was a personal affront against the trust of More and more materially, Lord Egerton himself. Donne met, and secretly courted, Ann

whilst she was under the protection of Lord Egerton's beloved late second wife. As his niece, she was therefore under his guardianship and care as well. For a member of his household to surreptitiously seduce his young ward was a betrayal both personal and professional of the most fundamental nature. The position of a Secretary was, as described previously, one of utmost trust and intimacy for a man of Egerton's stature, so for Donne to go behind the backs of his employer and that employer's brother-in-law was a socially and professionally risky endeavor.

The marriage was of contested legality as well. At the most basic level, secret marriages of any kind were not actually permitted by church or civil law. It is true that there are many recorded cases of clandestine or private marriages at the time; Egerton himself was married to the Countess Dowager of Derby in a private unpublicized ceremony (Stubbs 156). Such ceremonies were only allowable with the assurance of elevated position, which would allow for an ecclesiastical waiver after the ceremony. In most cases, marriages at the time were required by both canon and civil law to be preceded by licensing and readings of banns. These latter required that the proposed wedding be publically announced by a church on three Sundays or holy days prior to the ceremony, partially to prevent covert marriages such as Donne's (Greaves 182). Special licenses could be purchased to allow the marriage to proceed without the reading of the banns, but such licenses were prohibitively expensive, and at any rate Donne and Ann certainly did not have one. In addition, marriages were only supposed to be

conducted during certain times within the ecclesiastical calendar, and Donne's marriage fell squarely within Advent, one of the prohibited periods (Stubbs).

Even more problematic than the lack of banns was Ann's age. At the end of 1601, Ann was only 17 years old and still a minor. Legally, therefore, Ann needed parental consent to be married, and therefore Donne's marriage of Ann stripped Sir George of both his social *and* legal prerogative in the marriage of his daughter.

Despite Donne's relatively well connected place in the world, these infractions were not accomplished with impunity. After the ceremony the bride returned to her father, and it must have been almost as though nothing had happened. Ann and her father returned to Loseley, and it was several months before the issues were addressed. By January, however, rumors had begun to circulate, and it seemed likely that Sir George would begin to have suspicions. Donne resolved to inform his father-in-law of their changed relationship. The anxiety proved too much, however, and Donne fell seriously ill. Finally, in a letter dated February 2, Donne informed Sir George of the marriage (Stubbs 160).

Things went worse than Donne could have possibly expected. Sir George More, irate, went to Egerton and successfully stripped Donne of his employment and credibility. Refusing to acknowledge the marriage as valid, he had Donne arrested, along with the friends who had aided the couple, and Donne became a resident of Fleet Prison. The marriage was eventually validated in the courts, but Donne was left with no source of income and a father-in-law who seemed

unlikely ever to bestow upon the couple Ann's dowry or 'portion' (Bald 138-140).

This marriage, perhaps the most daring act of Donne's life, supposedly marks the line between two more of John Donne's characters: the rogue and the husband. Stubbs writes, referring to Donne's youthful portrait,<sup>xi</sup> that "Quite another Donne should be imagined in the late winter of 1601-2, much changed even by the experience of the previous couple of months: his dress more conservative, and more bedraggled, his beard heavier, his face shorn of its old serenity... he had become a more directed, single-minded person than the dreamer in his earlier portrait, changing from melancholy lover and gallant to desperate husband..." (Stubbs 167). Here we have an elucidation of another of the dichotomistic constructions of Donne. Although there is a limit to the extent to which close reading a biography may prove useful, in creating the image of a Donne who continually rises from the ashes of life events as a new creature entirely, Stubbs' language is significant. For him, Donne is not only influenced or shaped by the events surrounding his marriage, but he is wholly, "another Donne," clearly denoting that there is more than one John Donne, and that those Donnes are different people more than they are modes of the same one. In this instance, Stubbs views Donne before the marriage as a simple character, the "lover," and after as another, the "desperate husband," removing the possibility that Donne may have shared all of those characteristics at once.

An argument for a unified Lover/Husband John Donne seems strengthened by the fact that although R.C. Bald also views Donne as being a

different character post-nuptial, the rogue of Donne's youth is for Bald turned into a placid serene husband, completely different from Stubbs' "desperate" one. Bald tells us that his reading of "Wotton<sup>xii</sup> reveals an interesting change in Donne. It suggests an inner content which marriage had brought, even in spite of his dependent position" (Bald 146). Although Bald does not use the extreme "another Donne" rhetoric of Stubbs, his writing nonetheless reveals the opinion that Donne was fundamentally different after marriage. For Bald, the change for Donne is "inner", not merely reflecting different circumstances (in fact actively regardless of external circumstances). Bald describes a new Donne in that his portrayal of the married Donne is one with a different *character*. However, that there are such different characterizations of the person into whom Donne had changed may provide grounds for contending that these characters are mostly imaginary, and therefore a change need not to have taken place at all.

Carey, in his characterization of Donne pre-and post- marriage, is predictably more coy about exactly who John Donne became after marriage. He is vehement, however that marriage, or more precisely Ann, changed Donne fundamentally, writing that, "we may be sure that Donne's union with Ann put a stop to his loose living... Donne's fidelity to Anne was absolute: when he had her, he wanted no other woman" (Carey 73).

The evidence for the new Donnes described in the preceding passages is mixed. As Donne did not pose for a portrait (verbal or visual) during this time, Stubbs' unflattering blazon can only be characterized as slightly fanciful. We have no way of knowing how Donne dressed or kept his facial hair during the

days after his marriage. If Donne had, in fact, experienced a period of decreased regard for hygiene, it might have lent credence to Stubbs' characterization of Donne as 'desperate', but Stubbs fails to provide any evidence to support his hypothesis of Donne's post-marital appearance. It is more than possible that Stubbs' new Donne is, in his own words "imagined."

Bald's analysis, on the other hand, rests on his interpretation of a passage in a verse letter, as reported by Wotton, written by Donne after his marriage<sup>xiii</sup>. I will attempt, in this section, to address potential flaws in Bald's methodology that recur throughout the realm of Donne's literary biography. Foremost are the clear limitations of poetic analysis as an indicator of biographical truth. Firstly, it is predicated on a particular interpretation of a passage that can equally be read as contentment or depression, or resignation. Secondly, it equally presumes that Donne was concerned with biographical accuracy or honesty in his verse poem, and did not prefer to opt for an aesthetic over what he actually felt. Furthermore, even if we could trust Bald's interpretation and Donne's honesty in poetry absolutely, the feeling of content at the end of a poem is hardly sufficient evidence for a fundamental change in his outlook or character.

Similarly, Carey's evidence for a new faithful Donne rests on the fact that Donne, in the *Holy Sonnets*, disavows his former 'idolatrie' to 'all my profane mistresses'. Carey argues that because Donne addressed these to a God who he believed to be all knowing, Donne could not possibly have lied within the poem, writing in this case that there "could be no dissimulation" (Carey 73). The flaws in this argument are at the very least the same that can be applied to Bald's verse



poem analysis, and in fact include many more bases for incredulity. There is no evidence that the speaker in the poem is Donne himself, and there is no way of being certain that Carey's interpretation of the lines is the same that Donne himself intended. Furthermore, the argument rests precariously on the same assumption of Donne's absolute religious reformation that will be problematized later in this paper.

More problematic, and certainly more pervasive, is the agreed upon pre-marriage Donne: the lover, the seductive fashionably dressed young poet with the sad eyes. But was Donne ever actually the rogue he was painted as? Did his depiction fit his behavior? Certainly that character is familiar to us: he's been portrayed in literature long before and long after John Donne, but there seems no reason to believe that John Donne was ever really that person. The evidence for his profligate youth lies in two places. The first is in the escapades of Donne's early poetic speaker, (and later poetic lamentations), the latter is a single quote by a former classmate.

John Stubbs seems wholly content to unify John Donne the man with the speaker of his verse. *The Reformed Soul* begins with such a romantic escapade. "His mistress lived with her parents, and access was a problem" Stubbs begins, adding that, "Donne had to devise a way to keep his silk suit from 'whistling' as he skulked through the creaky mansion." This is the story of one of Donne's elegies, *The Perfume*, in which a young lover attempts to evade detection in a late night tryst with his mistress, but is finally caught due to the perfume he wears, which the young girl's father smells as the lover passes. Although Stubbs later

(begrudgingly) acknowledges, “[i]t might be a lusty account of an actual adventure; it might be all made up.” Despite this aside, Stubbs persists throughout in referring to the speaker as Donne himself, equating the escapades described in the elegies with ones perpetrated by Donne.<sup>xiv</sup>

Carey apparently accepts the early promiscuous Donne image even more readily than other biographers, although again his reasons are slightly different. Carey, admitting that the evidence supporting a unification of Donne with his early narrator is “scanty,” nonetheless bases his argument upon two later poetic expressions (Carey 73). As Carey fails to elucidate a justification of the logic behind accepting later poems as evidence but not the early ones, his argument is a slightly troubling one, but he points us to two later quotes regardless: Donne’s thanking of God for his deliverance “from the Egypt of lust, by confining my affections” (*Divinity*) and the aforementioned quote from the *Holy Sonnets*. Carey’s analysis here is again too certain in his own interpretations. Even if we accept the voice as autobiographical and confessional, there’s no reason that an old man feeling a liberation from lust must mean that he was a profligate philanderer as a youth. It could equally mean that, shut up in his room, writing elegies, he was prone to irreligious and impure thoughts. The *Holy Sonnets* passage is equally open to interpretation. Strangely, Carey infers from Donne’s allusion to former “profane mistresses” that Donne “may have confined his amours to the lower, cheaper social orders,” seemingly insinuating on the basis of the quote that a young John Donne frequented prostitutes, or at the very least loose, dishonorable women (Carey 73). In a more impartial assessment however,

one might easily agree that “profane mistresses” could far more likely refer to secular pursuits and ambitions of a totally non-sexual nature (which are, unlike the prostitutes, well documented), and that Donne’s use of the term mistress is simply a literary flourish. Carey is unyielding however, asserting that on the basis of those two passages alone, “we can discard the notion that the sexually promiscuous Donne who prowls through the elegies and the more wayward of the lyrics was a figment of his imagination” (Carey 73).

In fairness, it is not only 20<sup>th</sup> century readers of Donne’s poetry who equated his poetic narrator with the man himself. After the marriage to Ann, one of the objections Donne believed Sir George More to have against him was the circulation of rumors that cast aspersions against his character. In writing to Sir George after the marriage, Donne attempted to defend himself against “that fault which was layd to me of having deceived some gentlewomen before.” (Donne). Although this letter clearly indicates that rumors of his profligacy did exist, Donne does emphatically dismiss those rumors as false and based on nothing but his early poetry.

The problems inherent in the repeated suggestion that the character in the elegies are all John Donne are only intensified beyond those that problematized Bald’s interpretation of the verse poem. It is not to say that the elegies are conclusively not based on any elements of truth, but merely to point out that there is no reason whatsoever to believe that they are. It rather seems unlikely that so young a man as John Donne at Cambridge, following an advanced courseload in a population generally older and more experienced than he, would have had the

time or the opportunity for such widespread and frequent sexual dalliances. It is not necessary to go too much farther in depth on the relative merits of poetry as an indicator of biographical fact, but it does seem relevant in plumbing Donne's work for biographical details to note that Donne himself wrote of his poetry, "I did best when I had least truth for my subjects" (McGrath 73).

The second foundation for the charge of Rogue against the young John Donne is a single sentence recorded by a contemporary of Donne's from Lincoln's Inn, that Donne was "not dissolute, but very neat; a great visitor of Ladies, a great frequenter of Plays, a great writer of conceited Verses." The phrase, "great visitor of Ladies" has caught on, and is now all the license that anyone has ever needed to argue that the "great visitor of Ladies" in the elegies is Donne himself. There are, however, several other explanations for Baker's remark. It is possible that Donne was susceptible to teenage infatuations, but that would not have put him out of the common way. It is possible that the phrase is merely an exaggeration, written as a jibe at the poet. The rest of the quotation does nothing to dissuade us from this view of the matter, as the characterization of Donne's work as "conceited" suggests that Baker may have borne some ill will towards Donne. It is possible that the antipathy is very personal in nature, but it equally possibly a case of academic jealousy. The inclusion of a mention of Donne's "conceited verses" raises another possibility: that Baker did not in fact know Donne personally at all, and merely based his characterization off of general rumor stemming from the circulation of Donne's manuscripts at school.<sup>xv</sup>

In fact, it is at least equally likely that Donne was none of the characters suggested in the biographies, that he was never a Rogue to begin with, or fundamentally changed by his marriage. I propose instead to view Donne throughout his life as the consummate romantic, idealizing love to the perfect woman (Ann More) his entire life, even before she had a name for him.

If we can accept that the elegies are not written as autobiographical confessions but rather as literary exercises, all we are left with is a young man who put much ingenuity and labor into writing beautiful love poetry, not much to go on, to be sure, but by no means contradictory of the image of a Donne who was a romantic, constantly exploring (if only through verse) manifestations of Love.

More concrete is the evidence of his life trajectory. The extreme commitment evidenced by his marriage to Ann is hardly indicative of a man whose former life was one of promiscuous seduction. In marrying Ann, as has been discussed earlier, Donne was making an even larger commitment than most 17<sup>th</sup> century men entering into holy matrimony. He was pledging himself to love one woman for the rest of his life, but in order to do it he was also, as Stubbs puts it, defining himself “against every social and marital convention in the land.” He took a “massive risk,” and on the line was everything that he had worked for up until this point in his life: his social position, his employment with a powerful man, his hopes of secular preferment (Stubbs155).

His reasons for entering into this risky match are similarly inconsistent with a ‘rogue’ characterization. Whatever our biographers contend Donne became

after marrying Ann, the Donne who Donne was when contracting himself to Ann is universally portrayed as a man for whom promises to young women meant very little. Donne submitted, as justification after the fact, that he and Anne had already “plighted their troth” and promised themselves to one another. Therefore, “‘In conscience,’ they were already married” (Stubbs 158). Donne’s persistence and very real bravery in fulfilling his promises to Anne suggests that he was not quite the lying Lothario he is so often assumed to be.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1617, after fifteen years of marriage, Ann Donne died in giving birth to her twelfth child. She was thirty-three years old, and left behind, in addition to her husband, seven living children. Donne’s devotion, however, did not die with his wife. Now a widower, he was no longer the ‘husband’ that his biographers have turned him into, but he remained the lover that he had always been. Ann remained his perfect woman, idolized in his writings. Despite the pressures of children and an increasingly prospering social position, Donne, then in his mid-forties, never remarried, but remained devoted to Ann until he himself died fourteen years later (Guibbory 424-5).

## Chapter IV. A learned Divine, and a Powerful Preacher: John

### Donne and the Church

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January in 1615 John Donne took holy orders at the palace of the bishop in London. To mark the occasion, Donne performed one highly symbolic act— he changed his personal seal. Although the use of a personal seal has largely fallen out of fashion since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the personal seal of a person in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had much more impact and significance. A sealing itself would have referred to an impression made in wax by some hard object. This hard “seal” would be circular, oval, or square in shape and would contain images emblematic of its user. In Donne’s time, the seal would have been used on letters and other official correspondence, as a sort of authentication or signature, (think the modern colloquialism “seal of approval”), and every person’s seal would therefore be different. The image for a seal was chosen with the cognizance that this would be a person’s public image, the way he chose to present himself to the world, and therefore great care was used (Cherry et. al.).

Before taking orders, the seal Donne used was symbolic of a family claim. In an age where family respectability was akin to social currency (and therefore employability) Donne’s emphasis on a prestigious lineage (whether pretend or not) was a not uncommon way for young men subtly to suggest social superiority.

Accordingly, until 1615 Donne used the “demonic emblem of a crest of snakes bound up in a sheaf” (Stubbs 306). This symbol was used in antiquity by the Dwms of Kidwelly in Carthmarthenshire, a family from whom Donne was supposedly descended (Walton).

When Donne underwent the ceremony to join the church, he changed his seal to the now famous one, which shows a Christ figure crucified on an anchor. Donne was not coy about the meaning of the change, and it is the subject of a poem included as part of a letter to George Herbert in which Donne writes, “Adopted in God’s family, and so/ My old coat lost, into new Arms I go” (Walton). With the change of seal Donne attempted to change his public face, and actively cultivated an aura of reformation. The new seal, as his public emblem, was to symbolize a public transition, and change his persona from the secular family to a holy one.

For many biographers, Donne’s own public symbolism encourages a rhetoric of rebirth and renewal surrounding Donne’s entrance to the church. Stubbs writes that “Donne had shed his old coat snake-fashion, and had the robes for his new life ready,” creating, through his punning reference to the forsaken seal, an image of a wholly refashioned John Donne, who was unburdened by who he used to be and who was embarking on a “new life,” a phrase shared by both R.C. Bald, (who writes that the seal “symbolize[d] his new life”) and John Carey, although for Carey the “new life” in question was one of ecumenical greed more than honest belief. Stubbs describes the day that Donne took orders as “a watershed”, denoting a turning place, and a fundamental change of direction.



Stubbs, always the most extreme of the three in terms of language, writes that with the death of Sir Robert Drury at about the same time, Donne's "former life was dying behind him" beginning his "reincarnation" (Stubbs). Thus Dr. Donne is born, and Jack Donne of his youth dies away, separate characters entirely.

But was Donne's life with his new seal a different one than his "former life"? A more sober assessment of the situation reveals that the conception of Dr. Donne the reformed theologian is more realistically a successful public relations campaign begun by Donne himself than a fundamentally different human being. To the public, (and in many ways to later biographers) the move to join the clergy seemed like a marked change of path for Donne, indicating his final whole capitulation to the religious reformation that had so altered the political and religious landscape of the English nation. This was not only favorable but a *necessary* condition for Donne to achieve success as a preacher. The cultivation of a reformation image allowed him to take a public face in line with the prevailing political winds. By showing himself as a changed man, a forgiven sinner, and a reformed papist, he could cultivate an image of respectability in line with that of the predominant churchmen of the day. For Donne to obtain high position, he could not have even the slightest association with Jack Donne, the writer of erotic verse, or little John Donne, the bastion of a long line of Catholics. Outwardly, in order to succeed, he had to make the world believe that he was a different person. In fact, like every other major change in his life, the move to religious life had much less to do with any internal revolution than with external economic pressures.

The move was in many ways a desperate attempt to escape what is very arguably the darkest period of Donne's life. The years before taking orders were full of a burgeoning family and increasing debt for the now unemployable John Donne. He and Ann lived for a time with a kinsman, Sir Francis Wolly. Wholly without independent means, the time between his marriage to Ann in 1601 and his entering the church in 1615 was spent (with a little relief with the eventual payment Ann's dowry in 1609) in penury (Cambridge). He was once again sent up to Parliament in 1614, which might have seemed a glitter of hope for his political ambitions, but the parliament in question came to be referred to as "the addled parliament" and Donne's prospects failed to advance.

During this time Donne turned to the only avenue left in the secular world, succumbing to poetic patronage (a polite term for begging) to supplement his family's income (Stubbs 211). Donne became a sort of poet-for-hire, writing verses on the occasions of deaths or other momentous life occasions in honor of the wealthy gentry, who found it fashionable to have the ability to command poetry. Donne's reputation as a poet was such that his work was in demand, and a genuine Donne poem was a desirable status marker. Despite his abilities, however, income from such pursuits was uncertain. Donne curried favor with many influential persons, but achieved nothing like a steady income. The world of patronage was fickle—the Countess Bedford, touched by his 'Obsequies' on the death of her brother, offered to discharge his debts should he take orders, but later reneged on the promise. The Earl of Somerset, another admirer of Donne's, was at

one time a promising advocate for Donne's career, but his fall from favor at court meant the end of Donne's influential connection as well.

Increasingly dependent and short of funds, Donne returned to London to occupy a town home of another of his patrons, Sir Robert Drury, in an attempt to escape the damp of the house where the family was residing at Mitcham, outside of London. The move did no good, and the family's residence in London saw the death of Donne's son Francis, the third child to die within the year, adding funeral expenses to Donne's mounting debt and grief to his dire circumstances (Bald). Donne needed money, and taking orders was the most assured way of getting it.

This is not to suggest, as Carey does in his chapter, "Ambition" that during this period Donne became a creature driven almost wholly by avarice and ambition. On the contrary, I contend that if Donne underwent at that time any such sudden personality change he would have entered the church far sooner, or have sought at the outset more lucrative offices. I rather intend to convey a man whose hopes, wishes, and personal goals had not changed, but who was totally without options.

The Donne family was on the verge of starvation. Donne was without patrons, had already stooped to the level of poet for hire without much ameliorating his family's situation, and his debts were becoming pressing. Donne had no mechanism for paying these debts without the church and the benefactors that accompany it. That James had assured Donne a high place should he take orders meant that Donne was certain of gaining a good ecclesiastical position, assuring his family's comfort. Donne may have been ambitious, but since he

waited until exhausting all other options before taking orders, his actions seem more in line with those of a man who loved his family and wanted to provide for his children. From the point of view of a dedicated family man, Donne's adoption of a church living was an inevitability brought about by constrained circumstances.

Donne's reformation from secular politician to church man was in no way a drastic one by any measure. The unification of the Anglican Church and the English government during the reformation meant that favor at court and a high place within the church were more or less interchangeable entities. Tellingly, it is this promise of royal favor that seems to have decided Donne on entering the church, and that was the reason that Donne felt assured of rising to positions of more assured prosperity than he was able to do in the secular world. Walton reports that John Donne was very highly thought of by the King in ecclesiastical terms. He writes that the King was known to have remarked to the Earl of Somerset, "I know Mr. Donne is a learned man, has the abilities of a learned Divine, and will prove a powerful preacher; and my desire is to prefer him that way, and in that way I will deny you nothing for him." (Walton). Even if specious, the story is a telling one. The King's wishes were akin to command, and James repeatedly denied Donne secular advancement, making it highly unlikely that anyone else would choose to advance him, since to offer Donne a position would be going against James' wish that Donne join the church. John Donne's hopes for secular advancement had failed, and the only avenue left open to him was the church.

The extremity of Donne's "reformation" is also dependent on two basic questions, the degree to which he worshipped in the Catholic Faith originally, as well as the extent of his eventual devout Anglicanism.

So was Donne ever actually Catholic? After such a period of time, beliefs are difficult to prove, especially since such beliefs would have been secret by nature. He certainly had a prominently Catholic background. The auspicious root of this Catholic family tree was the famous Sir Thomas More, the former Chancellor of England and Catholic martyr. The consciousness of this ancestry must have made a powerful impression on the young Donne, at least with respect to his own sense of background. More, Donne's great-great-uncle, was the most powerful man at King Henry III's court, but gave up his life rather than deny the Catholic faith, a fact that would most certainly have left a familial burden on the young Donnes (Stubbs 11).

This is especially the case as the burden of family Catholicism was not ancient history. Donne's maternal lineage was filled with notorious Catholics. His grandfather, John Heywood, was convicted of Treason for participation in a Catholic plot to challenge Henry's religious supremacy, and was only spared condemnation at the last minute. Donne's uncle, Jasper Heywood, was a notorious Jesuit missionary, living in exile abroad. Even in Donne's nuclear family, his mother was a confirmed Roman Catholic, who went so far as to act as a liaison between an imprisoned Jasper Heywood and other members of the Catholic resistance, an act that would clearly have endangered both herself and her family. This was a family that took the old faith very seriously (Stubbs 15).

The Donne boys' early and often changing educational paths are also often attributed to their Catholicism. In addition to the fact that their early matriculation may have been an attempt to avoid the oath of supremacy (see chapter I), it is worth noting that the choice of Hart Hall was not random. The boy's enrollment at Hart Hall put them under the auspices of Philip Rondell, the hall's principal, whose half century tenure was characterized by his reputation for tyranny. His specialty was an orthodox morality which he forced upon the generations of students within his purview, despite which he was a widely rumored papist<sup>xvi</sup>. Another of Hart Hall's authority figures, Antonio Corrano, ironically their master of divinity, was often rebuked for heresy, and continually ostracized due to his Spanish national origins. Oxford in the 1580s was rigidly controlled by Puritan influences whose authority went far past administration and well into regulation of intellectual content, making Corrano's eccentric views on divinity very much at the pale of higher education standards. Such leadership and relatively independent association with the University made Hart Hall something of a refuge for outsiders, a place where strict adherence to societal norms was not enthusiastically enforced, and independent thinking was fostered, at least relatively (Stubbs 7).

Despite every evidence of intellectual aptitude, the Donne brothers left Oxford without taking a degree, and were sent up instead, to Cambridge. Again, scholars contend that this argues strongly for the Brothers being secret Catholics, wishing to avoid the scrutiny that came with age or graduation. This is certainly quite possible, and is by all means a logical interpretation of the facts. However, it

is presented as solid and undisputed fact by his biographers. Bald writes that “[Donne] had no intention of taking a degree, because of the Oath of Supremacy.” but it is in fact impossible to know Donne’s intentions or reasons for leaving Oxford (45). Carey similarly notes that, “as a Catholic he was of course barred from taking a degree” (22).

However, there are several distinct possibilities. In fact the practice of boys leaving without taking a degree was not at all uncommon, even if their allegiance to the Anglican church wasn’t in doubt. Many well off young men were merely there for a few years to obtain the requisite polish expected of a gentleman before following more worldly pursuits. That Donne left early may in fact have been fairly routine, and not necessarily as John Stubbs describes it when he contends that Donne was, “forced to creep out of the academy without receiving due honor” (21).

Additionally, if the leaving of Oxford was, in fact, designed to avoid detection as Roman Catholics, the move to Cambridge, even as a non-matriculating student, is an exceedingly contrary act. Although Cambridge, unlike Oxford, did not require older students to take the Oath of Supremacy, “[r]eligious discipline was left up to the colleges, and for that very reason was all the more strict” (Bald 46). As students at Cambridge, the Donnes would have been forced to attend chapel daily, and failure to observe University sermons could result in severe punishment. It is not impossible that these obstacles were not seen as insurmountable to a young Catholic, but it hardly argues for Cambridge as a refuge for recusant boys (Bald 45-46).

Furthermore, even if the reasons for every act within the life of the young Donne was to preserve a devout legacy of Roman Catholicism, they would have been his mother's reasons, and not Donne's himself. That Donne's family was Catholic, and that his youth was influenced by a secret Catholicism is hardly evidence that a young Donne, upon reaching adulthood, was in any exceptional way Catholic himself. This is especially true since every other pressure upon Donne—his love of scholarship, his loyalty to England, his friends at college—all would have steered a young man in Elizabethan England towards at least religious ambivalence, if not Anglicanism. Every piece of evidence offered for Donne's Catholicism, from his Catholic heritage to Henry's arrest, is in fact evidence about someone else all together, and never about Donne himself. This is not to say that Donne was decisively not a Roman Catholic, but simply that if he was, there is no evidence at all of that fact.

Having troubled the premise of Donne's original Catholicism, one must turn then to Donne's Anglicanism. Here, again, there seems to be no evidence to support the characterization of Donne as exceptionally devout. He was, to be sure, to write many sermons on religious *métier*, and to hold lofty positions in the church, but as has been discussed previously, it is in fact quite likely that such positions were quasi-political postings. They therefore need not be correlated directly with piety, especially given Donne's reluctance to undertake them in the first place. A thorough analysis of Donne's expressed views as an Anglican is perhaps too ambitious an undertaking to include in this paper, but it is at least worth noting one of Donne's most famous contentions, namely that those holy



people who would be 'saved' after death would not be only those people who correctly worshiped within the auspices of the Anglican church. For him, those people destined for heaven would be members "from the Eastern Church, and from the Western Church too, from the Greek Church, and from the Latine too, and, (by Gods grace) from them that pray not in Latine too" (Potter 12-13). The Donne we see here is neither the Roman Catholic nor the devout proselytizing Anglican Dean, but rather a John Donne who is in some ways both simultaneously, and who is, as I contend he must have all of his life, merely struggling with discipline in a context of profound personal and political religious upheaval.

## ***Part Two***

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*Poetry*

## A Note on Methods

In the first section of this paper, much energy is expended on the claim that poetry is a fundamentally unsuitable source for biographical information. From evidence of an insalubrious lifestyle to instances of unqualified piety or sweeping patriotism, I have argued that the passages cited by biographers to support biographical claims about the true feelings of John Donne during a period of time or about a certain action are inherently insufficient.

This argument is based on two premises. The first is that poetry, like virtually all texts, is non-specific, or rather, that it is a form that encourages abstraction. Even if we take every feeling expressed in every line of a poem to be completely genuine, the fact remains that there is virtually no way of knowing for sure to what those feelings refer. For example, in *The Storm*, Donne did not write, “love of England, to whom we owe, what we be, and have, is why I decided to join a naval expedition to the Azores.” Interpretation is often much more ambiguous. The prolixity of meaning is possibly even more prominent in poetry than acts of creative prose, as it becomes common, within the genre, to have any number of readers interpret the same line in as many ways, a process exacerbated by poetic language and line structures. Furthermore even if the feelings could be verified as genuine *and* linked with a reasonable degree of certainty to a particular

biographical action or event, they would still be artistic simplifications of complex decisions, reworked and polished for public consumption. There simply does not exist a method for knowing, with any degree of certainty, to what a given poetic reference is referring, or what fraction of the total picture that passage represents. Even the notes and statements of a living author, while illuminating, cannot be taken as definitively truthful.

However even those problems are relatively minor when compared to the most obvious flaw in any logical reasoning that functionally equates poetry to autobiography, which is that there is simply no justification for assuming that the feelings or stories written in poetry actually belong to the author himself. Poetry is a creative genre, and the speaker in a poem is in fact very unlikely to be the voice of the author. The subjects and feelings of a poem are matters of the imagination, even in the case where they are demonstrably inspired by actual events or circumstances. Cases in which biographers use poetry as the basis of historical speculation therefore seem unproductive<sup>xvii</sup>.

What then *can* a scholar glean from poetry? The second section of this paper intends to be a demonstration of an answer to that question. I have mentioned the separation between an author and his narrative voice. If we cannot, because of that separation use poetry to establish an author's biography, we can, logically, use it to establish a narrative biography. We can, as scholars, assume a given poem to accurately reflect the feelings of that poem's imagined poetic speaker, and as we move from the realm of literary historiography to simply the

literary, the interpretive leaps of literary analysis become methodologically justifiable.

In the first part, I have offered the suggestion of a unified John Donne, an interpretive biographical possibility. In this second part, I seek to offer a further unification, a unified poetic canon. The poetry explored in this section will be drawn from every stage in his career. It is difficult to date Donne's poetry precisely. As I hope is made clear in the first part of this paper, Donne never viewed poetry as a career, and the poetry was therefore never actively published by the author, and many poems were not made public until years after his death. The exceptions to this state are certain poems written upon the deaths of certain worthies, which can be approximately dated, although I have not had the space to include a discussion of those poems in this paper. Those poems would have been made relatively public, as a tribute for at least the grieving family. Most of Donne's poetry was circulated in manuscript form, amongst certain intellectual coteries, so his poetic fame was not widespread or commercial. The first groups of poems that I have written about, Donne's *Elegies* and his *Songs and Sonnets* are assumed to have been written during Donne's scholastic career or shortly after, sometime around the 1590s (Stringer 2). The latter groups I discuss, the *Holy Sonnets* including those from *La Corona*, are of even more widely contested dating, centering around 1610, but with some scholars arguing as late as around 1617-20 (Stringer 7). That the volumes of poetry were never published as such means that of course the writing of those poems may have been spread out over a relatively long period of time.<sup>xviii</sup>

The timing of the poetry, at least approximately, becomes important as this section will leave behind biographical claims, and instead seek to establish continuity in the poetry of John Donne, through his themes, style, and structures. The poetry examined is therefore presented thematically, around major concepts present in both the biography and the poetic canon: transgressive eroticism, conquering, and preoccupations with death<sup>xix</sup>. Although the poetry examined represents the span of nearly the whole of Donne's life, including the all of the biographical variations challenged in the previous section, I hope to show that the changes in subject matter do not signify any chronological transformation in the *essence* of Donne's works. This section is simply a further pursuit of continuity, another facet of a unified John Donne.

## Chapter V. On Erotic Violence

According to Achsah Giubbory, “*eros* was, for Donne, the driving force of life, affecting most relations, and spiritual and sexual desire not as sharply separated as we might think”(133). The speaker in Donne’s poetry is undeniably obsessed with erotic love, whether he loves love or loves to hate it. There are many instances where, “erotic love takes on religious significance” (Giubbory 142), but I will argue that in many cases the reverse is true as well, and works of religious significance take on erotic meanings. Helen Wilcox succinctly sums up this reversal, noting that, “in some sense... Donne’s religious sonnets may be seen as love poems to God” (150). It seems productive then, to combine the views, and argue upon the premise that despite the change in categorization (tellingly, Giubbory’s essay is titled “Erotic Poems”, Wilcox’s “Devotional Writing”)<sup>xx</sup>, Donne’s poetic canon is in fact *all* love poetry, that the categorization traditionally used is not strictly speaking necessary, and that Donne’s entire poetic canon may perhaps be read as erotic verse.

But what is the nature of that eroticism? Donne is, as ever, not simple in his poetic treatment of women. Ben Saunders writes that, “it is an awkward fact of Donne studies that while his representations of women have often been regarded as sexist, they have equally been praised as ‘extraordinarily self-reflexive in

relation to gender,' as protofeminist, and even as positively erotic" (114). As Saunders indicates, there is no one Donne attitude on women. Different women for Donne are treated differently, some with adulation, others with contempt, or even disgust. This inconsistency is what Elizabeth Harvey calls "Donne's perplexing and shifting treatment of women" (78). Attempting to come to a conclusion about the categorization of Donne's portrayal of women is a huge problem, and one that is far outside the scope of this paper. I will not attempt to prove, on a general level, what Donne's treatment of women empirically is.

There are however, notable instances where Donne's eroticism is markedly dark or violent. In the early poems, his *Elegies* and *Songs* have of course largely erotic subject matter, so erotic violence is perhaps a likely theme, enunciated by what Guibbory calls "[t]he misogynous wit of these poems" (136). Love begets disdain; violent images are evocative, and their inclusion in erotic verse was not out of line with the renaissance tradition in which Donne wrote, from Ovidian and even Petrarchan verse (Hadfield 50-63).

Perhaps less expectedly, Donne's penchant for erotic violence bleeds into his divine poetry as well. The extreme changes in Donne's professional situation that have been described in previous chapters correspond to changes in Donne's poetic subject matter. In Donne's early career, he wrote about love, then life at sea, and once he entered the church, his poetry became concerned with questions of divinity. That is, Donne's subjects changed superficially. However when one changes focus, and works with the premise that poetry is at least as much about the themes and the style than about the subjects discussed, one is forced to come



to the conclusion that Donne's poetry has truly remarkable continuity, even when comparing pieces written at the earliest and latest stages of his career. It is not simply that Donne's poetry is consistently erotic, but further that the eroticism in question is actually of a quite similar nature, in that it intertwines violence and the sexual act.

In this section of the paper, I will offer several poems as case studies of certain representative continuing themes. I wish to stress that neither the themes selected for review nor the poems mentioned as case studies are by any means exhaustive or complete views, but rather have been chosen as representative examples of continuity as a parallel to Donne's biographical continuity discussed in previous parts of this paper.

Perhaps nowhere in Donne's romantic poetry is his use of metaphors of erotic violence more clear than in his use of war imagery to characterize the romantic relationship. In the elegy, "Love's War", the metaphor is apparent from even the title, which invokes the love-war correlation directly. Like so many of Donne's other metaphors, this one is multidirectional; one here might see 'Love' as a combatant in a war, anthropomorphizing the abstract emotion or state as a violent entity. Equally, the title may refer to a war about or for love, in which combatants fight to gain love. Most likely however, in the context of the poem, the title is an equation, the now clichéd, 'Love *is* War'.

This equation, if it is in fact one, is markedly antagonistic. To whom the antagonism is directed shifts throughout the poem, representing, like the

ambiguity of the title, Donne's shifting objects of erotic violence throughout his work. The opening of the poem shows the mixed object of the warfare:

“Till I have peace with thee, war other men,  
And when I have peace, can I leave thee then?  
All other wars are scrupulous; only thou  
Oh fair free city, may'st thyself allow  
To any one...” (33)<sup>xxi</sup>.

Here the enemy or “foe” is not the beloved, but other men, the rival suitors. The beloved is rather the object, the spoils of war, the city to be conquered<sup>xxii</sup>. This process of defining of war within masculine circles may simply be a manifestation of what critics like Guibbory and Harvey have characterized as a dominantly male voice, one that employs a “distinctly male perspective” and excludes the internalization of female feeling (Guibbory 133). However, although certainly objectified and ‘othered’ by this exclusion from this male on male competition<sup>xxiii</sup>, the woman is not totally without agency. Even as the object of war, she is clearly of great importance and power in that she is the begetter of this war.

Furthermore, the beloved is endowed with the ability to “thyself allow”, to choose her own fate. This agency is important in the sense that no matter how “fair” she is, it is also her choice that is the precept of war. Thus, the anger of the warrior speaker is not even especially against the other male combatants so much as it is against the beloved, in that she is ‘unscrupulous’ by choice and nature. Although he depicts the war as between him and other men, this passage illustrates aptly that the real war of the poem is between the speaker and the

beloved. This argument is somewhat formal in nature: one cannot miss that the structure of the poem is that of Ovidian direct address to the beloved. The first two lines are a pronoun back and forth, the first half of every clause the speaker's "I", set opposed to the beloved ("thee").

The war is not only an abstract unseen war within the poem, but an individually embodied one as well. The speaker exhorts his mistress to "here let me war; in these arms let me die/ here let me parley, batter, bleed and die" (34). In these lines, the beloved becomes quite the contortionist, acting both as combatant and also as the battlefield itself. The image of Donne warring and then dying in his lover's arms invokes an even older conception of erotic violence, *la petite morte*, the obviously violent conflation of the sexual climax and death. Furthermore, however, the sexual embrace is described as a place where one is beaten in the physical sense. Again, the violence is here oddly multidirectional. Although the speaker is the one who will "batter", he is also the one who "bleeds" and dies.

The erotic significance of blood for Donne continues into his *Songs and Sonnets*. In *The Flea*, one of Donne's most famous works, the speaker mounts a logical argument in verse for the yielding of virginity. Here, Donne revels in the imagery of blood, arguing that when both lovers are bitten by a flea, "in this flea... two bloods mingled be" (98). His language of consanguinity ("[the flea] swells with one blood made of two") is one of quasi rape, as the flea mingles their blood in a kind of "marriage bed" without the beloved's knowledge or permission. The graphic equation of sexual relations and the mixing of blood is

one in which Donne luxuriates, arguing that it is that fact that the “two bloods [are] mingled” which makes the flea the couple’s, “marriage bed”.

The ‘marriage’ produced by such consanguinity is inherently violent as well. The beloved, the woman, here becomes a “Mortal Sacrament”<sup>xxiv</sup>, mixing the holy sacrament of marriage with fleshly violence and death. The beloved addressee of *The Flea* becomes literally a murderess. The speaker cautions her against what he assumes to be her ‘use’ or habit, of violence, admonishing,

Though use make you apt to kill me,  
Let not to that self-murder added be,  
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three (98).

Here, the beloved mistress is in the habit of killing, and that such violence, notably both against the speaker and herself, is almost portrayed a feminine trait. With these lines, Donne neatly ties up sacrilege, erotic desire, and mortal violence.

Donne’s later, religious works carry on this thematic trilogy. Consanguinity and graphic blood imagery splatter Donne’s religious poems at least as much as in his elegies. In La Corona 6. *Resurrection*, Donne again revels in imagery of consanguinity. In this poem, Donne exhorts Christ to “moisten with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul” (135). Here Donne raises the same trope, the imbuing, both physically and symbolically, of foreign blood in the deeply personal way that was so marked in *The Flea*.

The comparison becomes even more striking a few lines later in *Resurrection*, when Donne describes his soul as being “Freed by that drop, from

being starv'd" offering an image of a speaker who is, like the flea, *fed* by the blood. Furthermore, this feeding on blood is portrayed as transformative. While in the flea, the parasite who feeds on the blood becomes, through the mixing of blood, becomes the elevated symbol of a sacrament. Here, the speaker's soul, nourished by the blood of a 'beloved' (in this case God), is similarly elevated from the profane to the divine.

The most striking instance of erotic violence in Donne's religious work is the Holy Sonnet, *Batter My Heart*, which Helen Wilcox suggests shows how for Donne, "loving God... can be as troubled and varied an experience as that depicted in his secular love poetry" (150). *Batter My Heart* offers the combat references most analogous to the beloved as enemy. Donne writes, in some of his most famous lines,

"Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you

As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend,

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend

Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new" (140)

The relationship with God evidenced by this poem is precisely parallel to the attitudes in *To His Mistress Going to Bed*. The 'three person'd God' is beloved, but also intensely violent— He 'batters', 'knocks', 'overthrows', 'breaks', and 'burn[s]'. Not only is the language actually exactly that used in *Love's War* ('batter') the syntax lines up, with Donne's repeated short lists: here "breake, blowe, burn", in *Love's War*, "parley, batter, bleed". Ramie Targoff, in *Body and*

*Soul*, argues that, “the violence of this... cluster of verbs is heightened by the sheer power of the alliterated *b*’s echoing the opening command” (122).

The violence implicit in the poem marks a shift, from aggressor, when the speaker was the one who batterer, to victim, the batter-ee. This antagonistic relationship between the speaker and his God is further complicated by the confession that the speaker is, “betroth’d unto your enemy”. Although this ‘enemy’ is presumably not the speaker or God, but rather Satan, Donne is here again mixing amorous and military metaphors to convey oppositional relationships, a process that Targoff describes as “initially military images take on erotic resonance” (123).

This violence is again eroticized, through entendre (“rise, and stand”), but also through the organ being assaulted, the speaker’s heart, through which he loves. As Targoff puts it, the “lines demand a physical intimacy that cannot readily be excused as physical longing” (123). It is not a stretch to read implications of rape here, both in the speaker’s overthrowing by “force”, but also in the last line of the poem, in which the speaker is described as “ravished”, lines George Saunders implies are “shadows of blasphemy and sodomy” that, “flicker across th[e] poem”<sup>xxv</sup> (89).

From his earliest works to his latest, whatever the ostensible subject matter, Donne’s erotically violent imagery of blood and battle is strikingly continuous. This strong thread acts to create a clear cohesion between the speaker of the *Elegies*, and that of the Divine poems. This career of love poems indicates a speaker infatuated with love who played with methods of erotic expression.

## Chapter VI: On Conquest and World Politics

Like so many of the metaphysical poets, Donne frequently found romance and symbolism within mundane imagery. Donne's time in diplomatic service makes it perhaps unsurprising that images of geopolitical conquest are a leitmotif within his early work. This thematic trend encompasses metaphors of government, of siege, of boundaries, and of imprisonment. After Donne leaves political service for the church, his interests in those themes are not in any way diminished.

As with images of physical violence, there are so many examples of these references within the large canon of Donne poetry that to close read them all would be an extensive affair. As a simplification, I offer instead a case study, a side by side comparison of two poems, one from the earliest stage, the *Elegies: To His Mistress Going to Bed*. From the Divine Poetry, I will once again use lines from the *Holy Sonnet*, "*Batter my heart*."

In the previous section, parts of *To His Mistress* which employ metaphors of military violence were discussed at length. In later lines, however, the metaphor changes slightly. Donne asks his lover to

Licence my roving hands, and let them go

Before, behind, between, above, below.

O, my America, my Newfoundland,  
 My kingdom, safliest when with one man mann'd, (35).

This passage is one of the most academically prodded in all of Donne's work, precisely *because* the geopolitical imagery is so startling. The lines, Achsah Guibbory notes, "[express] a fantasy of male power that may also have sociopolitical significance," and according to Guibbory may represent a grappling with the political reality of a female monarch in a patriarchal state apparatus. Guibbory asserts that the seeking of permission, or "licensing" for exploration is a direct analogy to deference to the Queen, but also that this relationship is troubled by the fact that, "once license is given, she becomes territory to be possessed" (136).<sup>xxvi</sup> That the assertion that a kingdom is "safliest with when one man mann'd" may have been implicit commentary on the role of Elizabeth I is undeniable, but it might equally reflect a poetic paranoia about infidelity. At any rate, the previous lines have obvious geopolitical implications, equating the sex act to the act of exploration, conquering and colonization by invoking "America" and "Newfoundland."

Iona Bell adds to this consensus by reading the structure of the poem as a metaphor of geographic discovery. This metaphor, she argues, is placed in, "the outpouring of prepositions, one following another in quick rhythmic succession" (208). One can see, in this way, how this prepositional string may mirror the process of imperial exploration. Donne has his speaker geographically searching the woman, (or 'kingdom') and that search ends in conquest, and the forcible transfer of imperial power.



Similarly, in “*Batter My Heart*,” the image of conquered towns, if not conquered continents is again invoked, with “I, like an usurp’d town, t’another due, / Labour t’admit you, but oh, to no end” <sup>xxvii</sup>(140). Even at this much later stage of his career, Donne still uses this language of geopolitical conquest. There is a key difference however: like the “America” and “Newfoundland” above, here the speaker is the town conquered, another example of his shifting position in relation to power.

Parallels between the two poems are often not only similarly themed but positively equitable. In “*Batter My Heart*”, the speaker implores his “three person’d God” to,

Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (140).

The first lines here raise imagery of physical imprisonment, and avow the philosophy that this captivity might be liberating on a spiritual level for the poet. It is worth noting that although this is categorized as a “divine poem,” the subject matter is distinctly eroticized by the last line’s allusion to being “ravished”. One might therefore profitably juxtapose the line, “except you enthrall me, never shall be free” with the much earlier one, written in *To His Mistress Going to Bed*, in direct address to his mistress instead of to God, “To enter in these bonds, is to be free” (35). Although, as we have noted, the speaker is, in *To His Mistress*, the conqueror, and in *Batter My Heart*, the conquered, these lines are precisely analogous in every way. Thematically the comparison is obvious. The philosophy

of the liberation of captivation is equally present in the line from the elegy. Even the line structures are the same, a short clause of imprisonment, reversed immediately and falling to the final conclusion of “free”.

This nearly identical language choice, this exactly parallel phrasing and expression, epitomizes the relationships between Donne’s early and later works. Although in the former, the speaker wishes to be conquered and enslaved by love for a mistress, while in the latter the speaker wishes his captor to be God, the poetic effect is eerily similar. Here we see the threads of authorship, a continually cohesive poetic voice.

## Chapter VII. On Death and Resurrection

Ramie Targoff, in *John Donne: Body and Soul*, begins the chapter on *Death's Duell*<sup>xxviii</sup> with the following preface: "When Donne became a minister in the Church of England, he pursued his lifelong preoccupation with the resurrection of the flesh in a manner unprecedented in his earlier works" (154). This statement, admittedly taken out of context, illustrates a perceived obsession with death that Donne expressed at the end of his life. The use of adjectives such as "unprecedented" could be debated, and it is unclear what Targoff means by "manner", but what is key to an attempt to unify Donne the poetic figure is that this preoccupation was, in fact "lifelong". Targoff herself, in an essay for the Cambridge Companion to John Donne, notes that, "John Donne spent most of his life anticipating his death" (214). Donne was obsessed with images of death and decay, but these images did not begin in his elder, ministerial years, but rather permeated even his early erotic verse. To illustrate that point, I have chosen the following case studies: *Holy Sonnet 13: 'Thou hast made me', Death be not Proud*, and *The Canonization*.

His later poetry, unsurprisingly, deals prolifically with images of his own death, and that mortality is discussed in relation to God or spiritualism. *Holy Sonnet 13* begins,

Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?

Repair me now, for mine end doth haste.

I run to death, and death meets me as fast,

And all my pleasures are like yesterday (142)

Death is thus impending for the literary Donne, constantly advancing with alacrity. However, the speaker's relationship with death is not in any way the usual one. Targoff describes the lines as a "willful embrace of death dangled before us" (Targoff 111). Donne acknowledges "terror" in the face of death, but counters that terror by looking to God.

In looking to God, the speaker engages another Donne's literary predilections: resurrection. Donne is obsessed with death, and expresses a paralyzing fear of disappearance, of 'wasting away'. However, in religion Donne finds a weapon to counter death, and wholly reverse death's power, addressing God, "when towards thee/ by thy leave I can look, I rise again" invoking resurrection and divine afterlife in a religious context.

This rhetoric of resurrection is at times arrogant and taunting when, instead of God, the speaker turns his direct address to Death himself, as in *Death be not Proud*. "Death be not proud" he challenges, for he is certain that Death's victims, after, "one short sleep past... live eternally," allowing the divine and spiritual to triumph over death (138). The consequent implications for Death are then inevitable: "Death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die" (139). With a literary flourish Donne thus turns death's terrifying power back upon itself. When taken together, these two poems, and their arrogant fixation on cheating death

through a metaphorical resurrection, may be taken as a fair representation of Donne's religious poetry.

In Donne's earlier poetry, Death is obsessed over and then vanquished in much the same way; the only difference lies in the method. Instead of death's usurpation in the face of the divine, here death is conquered by means of the erotic. As Donne's religious work is at times eroticized as discussed in previous sections, his erotic verse is often infused with religious associations in amorous constructs that make them quasi-sacrilegious. This can be coupled with an example of Donne's death obsession, in "*The Canonization*". Firstly, the title is heavily laden with religious significance, however in this case, the characters which are becoming saints are not saints of the church, but are "canonized" for love, imbuing the ideal of a pure love again with a divine spirit. Guibbory explains that, in *The Canonization*, "Donne's figurative language makes sexual love sacred, suggesting that it offers a transcendent experience, a taste of the divine" (143). This love is equally capable of performing resurrection, both cheating death and in some unarticulated ways precipitating it. "We can die by it, if not live by love," the speaker tells his beloved,

And if unfit for tombs or hearse

Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;

...

And by these hymns all shall approve

Us canonized for love (78).

This, one of the most interesting and self-conscious passages in Donne's early work, offers resurrection again, a way to make physical death irrelevant. The resurrection here is of a slightly different kind. The mechanism is once again love, love that is pure and idealized, to be sure, but still an argument for power in the human spirit rather than the divine one, or rather that the former is generative of the latter. Here love *is* religious; the lovers here are not simply remembered, but "canonized", offering a synthesis of romantic and divine ideals. The tacit argument becomes that for Donne, love *is* divine, and might therefore bestow a divine power over death.

The mechanism of resurrection, however, is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the passage. Although Donne bestows divine power onto love through the imagery of sainthood, it is not God resurrecting the couple here but *verse*. In this passage, the speaker envisions the power of love as being invested in the poetry that he and others write. Although the lovers are not themselves inherently important, the *Sonnets*, the *Songs*, the *Elegies* and the *Epics* that encapsulate their love have a transcendent, transformative (saint-making), quality that allows the lovers themselves to live eternally, in effect allowing the lovers arrogantly to say, "Death, thou shalt Die".

### *Post Script*

This last passage proved, for Donne, remarkably prescient. Although he did, of course, die as Dean of St. Paul's in 1631, it is for his verse, and the love that inspired it, that he became immortal. His triumph over death is not due to his inclusion in "chronicle" (78), but rather for his poetry, with the clear and engaging voice that is identifiably Donne even after three hundred years.

But who is that voice? Is the speaker in Donne's poems Donne himself? Is he the rogue or the scholar, the lover or the soldier? Is he Donne at his lowest points, or exalted as one of England's most prominent theologians? Is he the deepest expression of the man who penned him?

The speaker in Donne's work is, as I hope this paper has shown, at once all of those things and none. He is not demonstrably John Donne, and perhaps more pertinently, John Donne is not him. The poetic voice, however clarion or engaging, is not the author. Nor is that voice defined by the subjects it discusses; The themes, structures and preoccupations employed form a continuity, a speaker preoccupied with transgressive eroticism, the politics of love and a struggle against and for his own mortality.

Crucially, if we accept the premise that poetic evidence is unsuitable for support of biographical discourse, we cannot conflate this poetic continuity with biography. Who then, is John Donne?

This question, I hope I have proven, is substantially less answerable than some literary biographers have chosen to portray it. The images of Donne constructed by the literary biographies described in this paper— the rogue, the doctor, the scholar etc., are merely convenient constructions, used to superimpose an unprovable rhetoric of transformative reformation on the biography of John Donne. It seems more honest, in view of what information is available, to acknowledge that John Donne's life followed the path of a fairly 'normal' and logical human being, that however transformative his verse was, he was unlikely to have been personally so. Although it is possible that John Donne underwent several life-changing, soul-reforming, cataclysmic changes in personal outlook or philosophy, without direct access to John Donne himself, such claims are fundamentally unfounded.

It is in all likelihood a unified and real, if complex person who became (as described in *The Canonization*) a literary saint, and John Donne "was unquestionably that man—whoever he was" (Bryson 196).



## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> London's National Portrait Gallery notes that the inscription might suggest that the portrait was intended as a gift for a woman, in hopes of winning her romantic favor. Donne's melancholy postures here might then be the assumed despair of a pining lover, a quasi-Petrarchan wasting away for love. It is also possible, however that the reference to a Lady might be a traditionally Catholic reference, reflecting Donne's inherited sense of suffering for faith, about which more in due course (Portrait Listed in the National Portrait Gallery, NPG 6790).

<sup>ii</sup> The portrait accompanied a publication "to be sould by R R and Ben: ffisher" (O'Donaghue et. al.). Ben Fisher was of course a contemporary poet and playwright; the enigmatic R R remains unknown.

<sup>iii</sup> This translation, rendered by Helen Gardner, is an avowedly literal translation. She also provides an additional paraphrased translation, "As the body is shrouded in white linen, may the soul be shrouded in a white garment also, which is not its own but is the white garment of Jesus." (Gardner 112-113)

<sup>iv</sup> The monument, dating from the year of Donne's death, constitutes a slightly disturbing view of Donne's mental state when one considers that he posed himself for the monument while wearing a funeral shroud, wishing to look as he believed he would upon resurrection at the Apocalypse.

<sup>v</sup> *The Calm* was written during the period when Donne was serving as a sailor in an expedition against Spain. The armada experienced a period where lack of wind kept all the ships stationary for days, and it is inferred that Donne wrote *The Calm* about or even during this experience. The timing of the poem makes the subject matter a near certainty (Bald 90).

<sup>vi</sup> Portrait Listed in the National Portrait Gallery, NPG 6790

<sup>vii</sup> The exact date of the ceremony is unknown. That it was performed about three weeks before Christmas is gleaned from the letter written by Donne to Sir George More to inform him of the couple's marriage. In it Donne writes that "We both knew the obligation that lay upon us, and we adventured equally; and about three weeks before Christmas we married" (Jessop).

<sup>viii</sup> The Inner Temple, still active today, is one of the Inns of Court, the professional societies for graduate students of the law in London (J. Baker).

<sup>ix</sup> Donne wrote that, "at the doing there were not used above five persons" (Jessop).

<sup>x</sup> The groom's family was also not without financial obligations. In return for the portion, a groom's estate was expected to provide a stipend in the case of the groom's premature death. This amount was usually something like 20-25% of the portion, a sum that Donne's finances were patently incapable of supporting (Greaves 156).

<sup>xi</sup> Described in this work, in the introduction, the portrait shows Donne as a young man, fashionably dressed and with a rather morose air. The inscription reads in Latin, 'Illumina tenebras nostras domina', or 'Lighten our darkness, Lady.' (Stubbs 167).

<sup>xii</sup> Henry Wotton was a lifelong friend of John Donne's. The two, according to Walton, met at Oxford, where Wotton was for a time, coincidentally, the roommate of that Richard Baker whose colorful commentary on the young Donne is recorded earlier in the paper (Bald 43).

<sup>xiii</sup> The passage Bald quotes is from the final two stanzas of a verse written on the occasion of Wotton's voyage to Venice as ambassador. Those lines read ,

For mee, (if there be such a thing as I)  
 Fortune (if there be such a thing as shee)  
 Spies that I beare so well her tyranny,  
 That she thinks nothing else so fit for mee;  
 But though she part us, to heare my oft prayers

For your increase, God is as neere mee here;  
 And to send you what I shall begge, his staires  
 In length and ease are alike every where. (Grierson 124)

<sup>xiv</sup> The poem is even less likely to be an account of true events when one considers that the poem bears some striking resemblances to the act of sneaking into a mistress' house at night as described by the Latin poet Ovid in his *Amores*. In elegy seven he writes

Love has thinned my body with such long usage,  
 and given me limbs that lose weight.  
 He'll show you how to go softly past watchful sentries:  
 he directs your inoffensive feet.  
 Now once I was scared of the night and vain phantoms:  
 I was amazed at anyone who went out in the dark.  
 Cupid laughed, so I heard, and his tender mother,  
 and said lightly, 'You too can become brave.'

Ovid would, if course have been common fodder to any boy in grammar school, and as a student of Latin and poetry at University, translating Ovid would almost certainly have been a large part of his exercises. That Ovid's poems were a considerable influence on Donne's poetry is therefore not at all unlikely, and is in fact discussed at length in Andrew Hadfield's essay on Donne's Contemporaries.

<sup>xv</sup> Carey, interestingly, more or less concedes these conclusions as to the merit of Baker's remarks, although for different reasons, writing that, "Baker's testimony doesn't count for much, one way or the other" (Carey 72).

<sup>xvi</sup> Rondell was widely considered to be a papist at heart, lending further succor to the reputation of Hart Hall as a haven for closet Catholics.

<sup>xvii</sup> The most famous example of these tensions lies in the Sonnets of William Shakespeare, which have long been fraught with questions of autobiographical authorial intent, including comments on Shakespeare's marital fidelity, sexual orientation, and personal appearance, to name only a very few. The illustrious Shakespearian scholars Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells note, however, that, "directly to the intimate, personal life of the artist needs to be treated with caution, even suspicion" (Edmondson 22).

<sup>xviii</sup> This brief sketch is meant as merely a reference tool for the approximate timeline of Donne's work necessary for claims regarding poetic temporality. This is by no means a definitive let alone exhaustive discussion of the dating of the poems. A truly meticulous presentation of the approximate dating of the poems is given in the Variorum Edition of the works (Stringer).

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<sup>xix</sup> These themes are of course also addressed by many of his contemporaries, and I do not mean to assert that they are in any way *uniquely* Donne. They are to a certain extent culturally produced, which may make their continuity less surprising. However, Donne is quite revolutionary in that these works are, for him, aspects of an agenda which foregrounds metaphysical play (a relatively new form) on these subjects, as will be seen in the poetry discussed later.

<sup>xx</sup> Both included in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*.

<sup>xxi</sup> Unless explicitly noted, the poetic analysis and excerpt in this section is all working from the Norton Critical Edition of John Donne's Poetry, Ed. Donald Dickson. It is denoted in the bibliography by (\*).

<sup>xxii</sup> Donne's imagery of politics and conquering will be discussed at length in a later section, and is only omitted here for the sake of clarity.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Donald Dickson, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of John Donne's Poetry, characterizes this rather poetically in an explanatory footnote as , "the wars of Mars" ( 33).

<sup>xxiv</sup> A chapter title within the section on Donne in Theresa DiPasquale's "Reconfiguring the Sacred Feminine".

<sup>xxv</sup> This criticism of Saunders' comes in the middle of a much larger essay/ chapter on John Donne and Sodomy. The homoerotic implications of Donne's eroticism with respect to God and Christ are certainly interesting and not irrelevant to the discussion, however this paper lacks the grounding in Queer theory that would make a more exhaustive discussion within the scope of inquiry.

<sup>xxvi</sup> This tension between the speaker's role as subject and then ruler is also underlined in Andrew Hadfield's essay on Donne's poetic precursors, when he writes that, "the lover casts himself as the imperial ruler" (53).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Such lines, of course, reveal the clumsiness of attempting to delineate Donne's poetic themes in the way that I have. I've included the lines in this section because of the conquering imagery, but of course, conquering is not tangibly separable from the military violence described in the previous section, and the section is certainly eroticized. As Ramie Targoff puts it, " It is difficult... to read the description of 'labour[ing] to admit you' without conjuring up a sexual as well as strategic dilemma" (123).

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Death's Duell* is the name of one of Donne's most famous sermons, delivered shortly before his own death. Although it does, in fact, contain many similar elements (obsession with death and resurrection amongst them) that bear discussion in the context of Donne's literary obsession with mortality, it is excluded here on the basis of genre.

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## Capstone Summary

In this paper, I seek, in a targeted way, to tackle a fundamental problem of the Literary Biography as a genre: Are we writing what we know, or what we *want* to know? I do this through the lens of the literary icon John Donne, whose truly fascinating life makes him an even more tempting subject for biographers than merely the draw of his poetic and oratory genius. John Donne lived at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an historical period which lends itself to biographical speculation by offering just enough of a record to make that speculation seem based in fact. It is partially this fact, partially the propaganda of the man himself, and partially the self-aggregating nature of the literary biography that has resulted in an image of John Donne that is fundamentally fractured. He is seen, and frequently written, as a collection of many different people: the Scholar and the Soldier, the Rogue and the Husband, the Politician and the Theologian. These all culminate to a biographical bright-line, the separation between Donne's youth and his maturity, the separation between Jack Donne and Dr. Donne.

This paper is an attempt to challenge that separation, first through an examination of the literary biographies themselves, and then through an examination of Donne's poetic canon. In the first section, I choose three influential biographies taken from across the span of the late 20th century's revived interest in Donne: *John Donne: A Life*, by R.C. Bald, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* by John Carey, and *Donne: The Reformed Soul*, by John Stubbs. I

then separate the biographies into sections, focused around traditional ‘pivot points’ in Donne biography, that is to say, the points that mark constructed watersheds in Donne’s biographical personality. The paper is structured to examine the junctions between Donne’s supposed ‘Characters’. I have given the context needed for an understanding of the trajectory of Donne’s life, but also for a characterization of the ways that the aforementioned biographies deal with that context. Each section then focuses in on the transitions themselves, deconstructing the methods used by each of the biographers to produce the sense of dramatic change.

This first section of the paper is broken up into four chapters. In the first, ‘From Scholar to Soldier’, I track Donne’s entry into University (Oxford, Cambridge, then the Inns of Court) and examine his decision to leave the study of the Law and enlist as a voluntary in the British Navy. I examine the various constructions of the shift (hero worship of Lord Essex, grief over the death of his brother) but ultimately argue that Donne’s enlistment was more likely in pursuit of an influential network. In the second chapter, I examine the transition ‘From Secretary to Politician’, troubling the claims that Donne may have had political ambitions for himself when he became a Member of Parliament, and instead suggest that Donne’s time as a politician may have been as simple as a method to curry favor with his influential employer. The third chapter, ‘From Rogue to Husband’ focuses on his marriage to Ann More and the biographical claims that his sudden love for her fundamentally changed him from the ‘great visitor of ladies’ he was in his youth into a steadfast and devoted spouse. I agree with the

construction of Donne as a devoted husband; the evidence quite reasonably supports that. I critique, however, the characterization of the youthful Donne as a rogue, pointing out that this characterization is based almost wholly upon the conflation of Donne's poetry with autobiography, and a practice I ultimately find to be methodologically unsuitable. In the fourth chapter, I analyze Donne's most famous transition, 'From Recusant [Catholic] to Dean', laying out the basis for the commonly held conversion from Catholicism to Anglicanism. Donne was from a notoriously Catholic family; he was a descendant of Sir Thomas More, his mother smuggled Jesuit priests in to see prisoners at the Tower, and his brother, Henry, was arrested for harboring a Jesuit Priest in his chambers at the Inns of Court. In his later years, Donne rose to prominence in the Church of England, as a favored preacher to the King himself and eventually the very prominent Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. I contest the various foundations for the trope of conversion on two grounds: the first is that although there is very compelling evidence that people around Donne were Catholic, there is actually no evidence whatsoever to support a contention that John Donne was himself Catholic, and the fact that he was sent to University at such a young age meant that he was functionally removed from the strict oversight of his Catholic mother before adolescence. The second is that every piece of evidence we have supports the contention that John Donne had actually no desire to take orders in the Church of England whatsoever, and only capitulated after the King himself functionally cut off every other avenue of advancement. Donne, struggling financially and increasingly unable to provide for a growing family, resisted joining the Church

until he was quite literally destitute. This does not preclude the possibility that Donne was a reformed Catholic, but does certainly offer reason to doubt the reformation that forms the scaffolding for Stubbs' work.

In the second part of the paper, I again problematize notions of a fractured John Donne by close reading poetry from every point in his career in order to establish a continuity of poetic voice to complement the previous section's biographical consistency. Although Donne's poetry has traditionally been divided into 'erotic verse' and 'divine poetry'. I do not, in this paper, seek to argue that there is no justification for this; the delineation matches both the chronology of the canon and the superficial subject matter. I do however seek to deconstruct the idea that this delineation is more than superficial or convenient. This section of the paper is divided into three chapters, based rather than chronology on themes emblematic of Donne's themes and poetic voice. In chapter five, 'On Erotic Violence', I close read case studies of Donne's early poetry as a discussion of his tropes of transgressive eroticism, and then trace those same themes into his later 'divine' work wholly unscathed. The next chapter focused on themes of 'Conquest and World Politics', demonstrating again, thematic and linguistic parallels between the erotic and divine poetry. In the final chapter, I work similarly, examining one of Donne's most famous preoccupations within his divine poetry—'Death and Resurrection'—and find the same themes, style, and phrasings not only burgeoning but already fully realized in his erotic verse.

The result, I hope, is the combination of two genres (literary biography and poetic analysis) to trouble the caricature that has resulted in the chronological

and artificial labeling of the many Donnes, and to redefine John Donne, as a person who is at once a lover, a soldier, a theologian and a rogue, and probably much else besides that we can never fully know.